



Four Years of African Film

Lyle Pearson

Film Quarterly, Vol. 26, No. 3. (Spring, 1973), pp. 42-47.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28197321%2926%3A3%3C42%3AFYQAF%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

I'm not the one who's evolving. It's the subject which imposes the movement. This story happened to be a collective story. I wanted to show action of a well-disciplined ethnic group in which everyone saw himself only as an integral part of the whole.

Have the Diolla people seen the film?

Before premiering the film for the Senegalese government, I went back to the village to project it. I remained three nights. All of the villagers from the whole area came and, because they have no cinema, their reaction was that of children looking at themselves in a mirror for the first time. After the first showing, the old men withdrew into the sacred forest to discuss the film. When I wanted to leave, they said, "Wait until tomorrow." They came back the second evening, then returned to the rain forest.

The third evening there was a debate. The old men were happy to hear that there was a beautiful language for them, but they weren't happy with the presentation of the gods. Though these forces obviously did not manifest themselves when the French arrived, the gods still were sacred and helped the old men maintain authority.

The young people accused the old of cowardice for not resisting at the end of the war. The women, of course, agreed, but were very proud of their own role.

And the reaction in the cities?

Many asked me why I wanted to make a film about the Diollas. You have to know that the majority of maids in Senegal are Diollas to give you an idea of the superiority felt by others in relation to them. (The African bourgeois have two or three maids. It's not very expensive.) To see *Emitai*, the maids left the children. They invited each other from neighborhood to neighborhood to see the film. Finally, the majority Ouloofs went to see the film and realized that the history of Senegal and of the resistance was not just the history of the majority of Ouloofs. The Diollas are a part of Senegal. And so are the other ethnic groups. And when the Senegalese government finally decreed that they were going to teach Ouloof, they were in a hurry to add Diolla. I don't know if that is because of the film, but that's what happened.

Your films obviously are influential political instruments in Senegal. Could films made in the United States have the same effect?

Alone, no. With the people, yes. There are those who stay secluded and say that artists are creating important works and everything is going to change. Nothing will change. You can put all the revolutionary works on the television, but if you don't go down into the streets, nothing will change. That is my opinion.

LYLE PEARSON

Four Years of African Film

I have seen in Persia a film which doesn't exist and which was called The Life of Charlie.
—André Malraux, *Esquisse d'une Psychologie du Cinéma*, 1946

I haven't been to Persia, which doesn't exist anymore. But there is an annual festival of films

in Iran—there are in fact festivals now sprinkled over the Near East and the northern half of Africa, in Damascus, in Ouagadougou, and sometimes in Rabat. The Dinar, France, francophone film festival has just cut itself loose and from now on will take place every other year in a Third World country—and the Federation

of Panafrican Cinéastes has suggested that an anglophone African festival may soon take place in Tanzania.

There is also the Cinematic Days of Carthage, the biennial festival which gave birth to the FEPAC. It is the oldest of such festivals and, being in Tunisia, ties Africa and Asia together for at least ten days every two years. Actually I have attended only this Carthage affair, in 1970 and 1972, and the 1969 festival in Rabat. But, as the director of the Carthage Festival, Tahar Cheriaa, has said, the 1970 festival included "practically all the African production since 1968," (with a hefty amount of films from the East) and African cinema outside of Egypt has been born only in the last decade.¹ While there were at least five American observers at the 1972 festival—there has never been a black American representative there, to my knowledge—I was (outside of Frederick Gronich of the MPAA and someone from the Tunisian division of the USIA) the only US observer at the 1970 festival. In addition, I've been seeing African films in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Paris for three years; and I thus modestly suggest that I probably know more about African film from a recent historical point of view than anybody else.

In 1972 African feature film production crept down to the equator (that is, if one is to ignore Lionel Rogosin's *Come Back, Africa* and the features made by the white South African community for its own consumption). This distinction can be shared by two equatorial African countries, Gabon and the Congo Brazzaville; the film from Gabon takes place in Gabon, while that from the Congo Brazzaville is supposed to take place further south, in the Portuguese colony of Angola.

It should be noted that the film from the Congo, Sarah Maldoror's *Sambizanga* (the title is the name of a quarter), is not the first feature to be shot in the Congo by a Third World director, Glauber Rocha's rather miserable *The Lion Has Seven Heads* having been shot there three years ago. It should also be noted that Miss

Maldoror, who is married to an Angolan writer and who has made a well-known short film on Angola, *Monangambée (The Cry)*, in Algeria and an earlier but as yet unseen feature on Portuguese Guinea, is not African—she is from Martinique. She lives in France, and is no more African than Franz Fanon. Her films show it; the photography is by Claude Agostini, and all of the technical aspects of the film are handled by Frenchmen.

The first film from Gabon, Phillippe Mory's *Les Tam-Tams Se Sont Tus (The Tom-Toms Are Silent)*, points up the problems with making a film in the way *Sambizanga* is made—both films are slick and made with a French crew but Mory, who has appeared in French films, is Gabonese and he takes for his subject prostitution (as well as polygamy).^{*} I asked Mory if the central character of *Les Tam-Tams*, which he plays himself, was aware of his own acts of prostitution and Mory said Yes; prostitution in Mory's film equals collaboration.

Is a well-made color feature in French that takes for its subject prostitution any better than a well-made color feature in Portuguese that takes colonization for its subject, but that tries to pass itself off as happening in another country? About all Miss Maldoror does to convince us that we're not in the Congo is to slap up a sign that reads "Angola" in front of what is supposedly a police station. The six-member all-Third World jury at Carthage thought that was all right and *Sambizanga* shared top honors with a Syrian film, and *Les Tam-Tams* won nothing. This is rather a pity I think for *Les Tam-Tams* has the look of an honest B-movie, of Samuel Fuller without the violence, and Mory consciously raises the question of ethics in filmmaking. *Sambizanga* looks like the least repellent work of Bo Widerberg, and Maldoror un-

^{*}These are also central themes in Oumarou Ganda's *Le Wazzo Polygame (The Polygamous Holy Man)*, a medium-length film, which doesn't look French at all. With Sembene's *Mandabi*, polygamy has appeared in at least three African films; prostitution, however, appears more rife south of Senegal.

consciously raises the same question. If *Sambizanga* is a hit in France and not in Africa the French bourgeoisie will have won out again; that is, Africa will have been forgotten in the wake of French aesthetics and profits. Mory complained, "You can't win here if you don't make a political film," but *Sambizanga* brings up this other problem, which seemed to irritate a larger part of the Carthage public—the idea of collaboration with the French.

It is unfortunate that in tracing African-by-Africans feature film production it is necessary after these two African-French co-productions to jump half way up the coast to Senegal, but it is also indicative of the African film scene. Film-making is even more sparse in the interior than on the coast, and more so in former British territories than in the French. A 16mm feature from Gabon, *Il Etait Une Fois Libreville* by Simon Auge, was withdrawn from competition at Carthage because Auge views it as merely "research" preliminary to a real feature. The only possible stop between Gabon and Senegal is Ghana, which had a 35mm feature at Carthage in 1970, Sam Aryeety's *No Tears for Ananse*—the only African feature I know which is based on national folklore. King Ampew, a Ghanaian who has studied film in Munich, had his final thesis film, *They Call It Love*, in competition at Carthage this year but it was filmed in Munich in eleven days on a very reduced budget and is hardly a movie; its subject, like that of Denis Sanders's *Soul to Soul*, is Ampew's view of American blacks, living in Munich, and their music. (*Soul to Soul*, while being shot and shown in Ghana, remains a sort of inverted travelogue in which black American performers rather self-consciously search for their own "soul"—Wilson Pickett is the worst offender. We did not get *Soul to Soul* at Carthage, nor Ossie Davis's Nigerian-American-Swedish coproduction shot in Nigeria in 1970.)

Since 1969 Senegal has made at least one feature every six months. We got, as far as I know, every one of them at Carthage although only one was in competition, Mahama Traore's *Lambaaye* (the title is the name of a town), a 16mm

adaptation of Gogol's *The Inspector General* to Senegalese reality. Like his *Diegue-bi* (*The Wife*) which I saw in 1970, Traore's new film is awkward in its beginning scenes; unlike *Diegue-bi* it is not a satire on other African films. In the former, the hero has financial difficulties caused by his *femme*, as in Oumarou Ganda's *Cabascabo*; she in turn lies to the local grocer, telling him that a *mandabi* will soon arrive to take care of their bills; also, a young rake is named Ousmane. Where Sembene uses a small economy car for an effect in *Mandabi*, Traore uses a Corvette. *Diegue-bi* pulls a final switch on *Mandabi* in that the husband is arrested and his wife is left alone with the bills. In both *Diegue-bi* and *Lambaaye* a priest or marabout appears; in the former almost everybody asks him for advice and he demands a fee, which everybody pays a part of; in *Lambaaye* he simply poses a benediction, "This *must* be the inspector," and then is seen no more. Much of the humor here is in the dialogue and the satire of Islamic custom; the fake inspector speaks Oulouf like the rest of the cast but dresses up his speech with both Arabic and French expressions. At the local hospital, the patients of which are for the sake of the fake inspector *en congé*, he asks the staff how they pass their time, "Playing cards?" (Gambling is forbidden by the Koran.) Satirically presenting another Islamic custom as well as the desire to climb the social ladder, a young girl is prepared for a forced marriage with the "inspector." The big switch from Gogol's plot comes when the non-inspector starts borrowing money from everybody; this is a theme common to most Senegalese films.*

The technique is often crude in a Traore film

*It occurs not only in *Diegue-bi*, *Lambaaye*, and *Mandabi* but in Momar Thiam's 1971 *Karim* (*The Generous One*). The theme of man seduced from his money by a woman is also common in African film; it exists in *Diegue-bi*, *Karim*, probably in Thiam's *Mon Beau Pays*, *L'Option* (*My Beautiful Country, the Option*), and in Ganda's film from Niger *Cabascabo* (*The Old Warrior*). Ganda, being from a more heavily Islamized country than these other film-makers, provides a reference from the Koran to Samson and Delilah.

—bad lighting, unbalanced compositions, awkward angles. But, perhaps because this year he lacked the competition of Djibril Diop (whose *Badou Boy* tied for second place at Carthage in 1970) *Lambaaye* came in on a three-way tie for third place; only African and Arabic films at Carthage are in competition. And there is in spite of this occasional awkwardness an element of spectacle here that *Diegue-bi* does not have. Near the end of the film we see an outdoor entertainment session, with some remarkably sexy dancing and a sort-of-blues singer in a blue satin dress, battery-operated microphone in hand. The scene is handled as if it were in a documentary—pans moving across the audience in which you have to search pretty hard to locate the protagonist (the entertainment is being presented for his benefit) and hand-held close-ups of the singer—there is an air of hand-held spontaneity here, as there is in a more subtle way in most of the film. It is as if Paul Morrissey had headed for the veldt and cut out his dirtiest jokes.

Traore and Morrissey—the events and people they tend to show us are often more important than the stories they tell. Do we like, or dislike Holly Woodlawn because of a predicament he/she may find him/herself in, or because of him/herself? The same for the singer in *Lambaaye*, who is probably totally unaware of the plot into which she has been tossed; in fact we can't really relate her to that plot, she is interesting only as a singer, we are curious to see her manner of presentation, to know how she sings a song. And there is a similarity in the way Morrissey and Traore make films—while the credits of *Lambaaye* list more technicians than an Andy Warhol film ever does, both make 16mm story features in color with improvised dialogue and direct sound and often take their jokes from other movies. Traore even looks like Warhol—dark glasses, an American Army jacket, a small under-the-chin beard, and a slinky movement that would make you sure, if he was from the United States, that he was a pusher. It's nice to know there's someone making anti-establishment films in Africa; it somehow assures me that

Warhol isn't such a freak after all (and that there may be more weight to the ontological theory of film than was formerly thought).

On the other hand, Babacar Samb, who remains a friend of Jean Rouch since their work on a short film together ten years ago,* has made *Codou* in non-handheld 35mm black and white, the story of a young girl who loses her mind after failing a ceremony in which her lips are to be pierced. Modern psychiatric practices fail to bring the girl, Codou, back to sanity although traditional methods of cure do. The question remains: will she remain sane for long? According to Samb—

Each time someone has tried to graft a culture on our own, it has been a failure. We have our feet in the middle ages and our head in the modern world. To want access to the modern world without taking account of this middle age is a serious fault. . . . to want at any price to return to the middle ages is no more viable.

In my film, I affirm that it is necessary to assume one's own culture to gain access to the modern world.²

This really is the same concern that we find in *Les Tam-Tams*, the same question that *Sambi-zanga* raises unconsciously, and both the subject and the major problem with the new film by Ousmane Sembene, *Emitai*.

Ousmane Sembene in *Emitai* (*The Angry God*) definitely tells us that collaboration with the French is a bad thing. *Emitai* is a complicated film, much more so than any of these others, and I'm going to deal with it from this one point of view. The point is that *Emitai*, like *Les Tam-Tams*, describes but also suffers from this collaboration, albeit on another level. It does not suffer from it in a preconceived or self-

*Few African directors have. Sembene, for instance, is fond of saying that Rouch, outside of *Moi, Un Noir* (*Me, a Black*), treats Africans like "insects." Ganda, who is featured in *Moi, Un Noir*, has to my knowledge expressed no opinion on Rouch, but the Carthage festival refused Rouch's *Petit à Petit* (*Little by Little*) in 1970. The problem, again, may be one of reluctance to collaborate with the French.

justifying way; it would be unfair for Sembene to make such a film, for his very point is that collaboration with France is a bad idea. But this collaboration exists in Sembene's films by virtue of their historical situation—they are made with French government money, through the advance-on-receipts law used by many French directors; and *Emitai*, unlike *Mandabi*, has been censored.

In *Emitai*, which takes place near the end of the Second World War, when Sembene was a boy, the French army tries to enlist Senegalese citizens against the Germans, but the Senegalese have little interest in this "white man's war"; their apathy is entirely reasonable and very funny. The film takes place in the south of Senegal among the Diolla, an animist and not an Islamic people (*Emitai* is a Diolla and not a Oulouf word). From the French comes the command that the rice in the village is to be confiscated for the troops; the women of the village hide the rice and the local priests, acting under the advice of their animist gods, which are presented as masks in pink-tinted close-ups, attack the French officers. The attack fails, the priests begin to doubt their own gods, and the Senegalese already enlisted into the French army are

forced to fire on the village women—and it is here that the censorship enters. Originally one was to see the soldiers fire followed by the bloody bodies of the Senegalese women; now this is "left to your imagination," as the Senegalese consul to Tunisia told me: we see the soldiers fire, the screen goes black—and that's the end of the movie.

Sembene's new film has been marred by censorship but what we can see of it is a masterpiece—a new style of film, unlike the *Musée de l'Homme* documentary quality that hinders *Mandabi* stylistically, and totally different from all western manners of story-telling on film. Few films cannot be related to other films in their story or in their style; Sembene's *Emitai* can be related to Sophocles's *Antigone* in its story, but not to any film in its style. This is true in its manner of photography—almost entirely long shots, never extracting its characters from the environment, but making the environment an integral part of the story—and in its pace. There are no flash or quick shots, the editing is never manipulated to gain speed on events, everything is made ultra-clear, as if the length of the action



Sembene's
EMITAI

and the objectivity of the photography were enough to clarify not only the story but Sembene's thought processes behind the story.

Jean Narboni claims that in *La Noire de . . .* (*The Black Girl from . . .*) Sembene treats "the two employers . . . as blacks are treated by Griffith, but Sembene is not so cinematically inventive" (*Cahiers du Cinéma*, May 1967). So be it; but here he breaks away from all the Griffith-inspired devices—subjective angles, cross-cutting, the speeding up of reality by progressively shorter shots, the devices of emotional story-telling—that have plagued filmmakers ever since Griffith. Who has bothered to get away from the bourgeois syndrome besides Godard (and possibly Rainer Winder Fassbinder) previously in commercial story-telling film?

I don't mean that the story remains clear at all moments in *Emitai*—with this new ultra-clear presentation of action, in which every action is presented in one shot, a consequent breakdown in continuity appears. If one is not aware of the story in advance or if one loses just one shot—as, unfortunately, happened at the second and last showing of the film at Carthage, when we were not shown the soldier firing on the village women—one is aware only of clearly presented action but not at all of how those actions relate to one another. This may be intentional, as far as the desire to stimulate thought goes—Sembene likes Brecht. Sembene has not made a film for everyone—not the French, nor the Frenchified Senegalese bourgeoisie. *Mandabi*, in spite of its success in the US and the USSR plus a showing on French television, still has had only limited showing in Dakar, and I'm sure this has somewhat isolated Sembene from other Senegalese film directors. Here he has created a film for serious-minded people who are willing to think and to decide. Sembene, having trained in the USSR under Marc Donskoi, and having previously been active in dockers' unions in France, considers film a political tool but he remains a victim of the trap that both French and Senegalese bureaucracy have set for him. *Emitai* is not a film for *tout le monde* politically

or aesthetically and even in its reduced form is probably not going to be seen very much outside of the festival circuit. Even at Carthage a group of young Tunisians after laughing through several reels walked out on it.

It is a pity that we, partly through bureaucracy and partly through taste are not free to see and to accept this beautiful, path-finding work from a major artist—be he black, white, or like the photography surrounding the gods which he so objectively presents—pink.

There were also seventeen African short films at Carthage in 1972, from ten different countries. The jury couldn't decide which was the best and gave equal prizes to five short films. Four of these films were in 16mm, and Moïse Le Lecourt's *Le Mvet*, about the making of a musical instrument, shot in the Cameroun and edited through various ethnographic services in Paris, is the most technically advanced short film that I have yet seen by an African. As well it should be—it took him eight years to make.

The many features from North Africa and the Near East which were also shown at Carthage must be the subject of a later article.

NOTES

1. An interview by "H. G.," "Il faut faire éclore dans toute l'Afrique des cinémas nationaux," *Algérie-Actualité*, April 2, 1972, p. 18.

2. Interview by D. Bouzid, *Contact* [Tunisian cultural magazine], n.d., p. 7.

Additional Bibliography

Hennebelle, Guy. *Les Cinémas Africains en 1972*. Paris, Société Africaine d'Édition, 1972.

———. "Petite Planète: Afrique," *Cinema '70*, No. 142, January 1970, p. 66ff.

Kamphausen, Hannes. "Cinema in Africa: A Survey," *Cinéaste*, Vol. V, No. 3, Summer 1972, pp. 29-39, with appendixes on "Cinema Facilities" and "Media Development" from 1966 USIA material, pp. 40-41.

Vieyra, Paulin. *Afrique et le Cinéma*. Paris, Présence Africaine, 1969.

———. "The Cinema and Africa," *Topic*, No. 70, USIA Publication, Washington, D.C. and Beirut. (The same issue of *Topic* includes interviews with Babacar Samb and Ousmane Sembene.)